

How to lose, slowly | Mint

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The local legend is fascinating. Pandit Nehru in one of his grand nehruvian moments decided to green Rajasthan. He had seeds of Australian Babool sprayed all over the state from helicopters. He had been advised that this was an extraordinarily hardy species, and could endure very well. I heard of this apocryphal story from Abhishek in Tonk. As I stood in the flatland outside Tonk, the success of his measure is visible all around. The invasive hardy species has crowded out most local flora, including its own cousin the Indian Babool.

The bright light of the summer evening faded into a lit night, as we drove the 100km from Tonk to Jaipur. I have never ever, anywhere, seen more trucks, not even at a port. The entire drive was just one long queue of trucks. Every truck was laden to the brim with sand, destined for construction sites in Jaipur, Gurgaon, Noida. This is the story of every night on that road; the fires of construction sucking sand through this road, night after night, year after year.

The sand is not from the desert, Tonk doesn't have "sandy" desert. It is all from the bed of the river Banas. The river ran dry some 13 years ago, when a dam came upstream. When you cross the bridge on Banas, outside Tonk, it surprises you. Its big, must be a kilometre across. Though, what you cross is the memory of a river. When you take the water away from a river, and take away the bed of the river, what do you leave? You kill the river, leaving a memory.

A few decades of human intervention has changed land totally. Good intentions, folly, greed, development, commerce, all inexorable human forces, have changed Tonk. Even Nehru, a man with bold vision, who has done more for us than we care acknowledge today, could not have foreseen the power of cumulative human blows to our land. The truck driver certainly doesn't see this, nor do most of us. Because this happens slowly; in human time change over a few decades and centuries is so slow that it is indiscernible. On geological scale such time periods are less than nano moments. The river that earth took millions of years to create, we have killed in a moment.

Tonk is only a metaphor for what is happening all over the world. And it's a relatively benign one at that. There are other changes such as the precipitous increase in greenhouse gas concentration leading to climate changes that are not so benign. Many more are changes that are local. Most of these somehow get interconnected, because nature is interconnected.

Wherever I go, I see and hear of these changes. A couple of months ago, I drove around in Bellary district. This was my first time there. I saw how a cut mountain looks like. Not “cut through” for a tunnel or road, but just cut down, like an amputation. It was probably cut over a decade. Not everything is as stark, like a physical jolt.

The hills of Garwhal and Kumaon are choking on waste plastic. Hill after hill is denuded for step farming, many of which are abandoned as people migrate from the higher villages to lower, and then to the plains. In the district of Uttarkashi, people say the mountains are moving. They are seeing more landslides than ever before. It’s the construction of roads and buildings and cutting of trees that’s making the mountains move.

Beautiful Skelleftea is 800km north of Stockholm. I used to be there every second month. Now I don’t go there and I miss it. My friend Olov Larsson who has lived in that area for 50 years, misses the winters of his childhood. He has told me “there are no more winters here”; we Indians may not agree with him literally, but it is easy to get what he is saying. My Finnish friends have told me that the traditional week-long skiing break in February has become meaningless, because most years there is not enough snow to ski. Or they have to go further north.

All such changes happen slowly from a human point of view. Even the mountain was cut slowly. Over time some of us may feel for it, remember things as once they were. Then the new normal is accepted, by the new generations.

I am not writing about the causes of these changes. Reams are written about the specific causes, and how to tackle them. All emanate from the inexorable human forces, and the progress of our civilization, as we have come to believe in. What I am pointing out is something that David Orr talks and writes about almost lyrically, the overwhelming nature of slow changes. Slow by human count, lightning fast for nature.

Most of us remember a cooler Bangalore, my children don’t know of it. Abhishek’s children won’t know of any other Tonk. We are losing our monsoon, few of our children will feel it. We are gaining a kind of civilization, and losing our earth.

Anurag Behar is chief executive officer of Azim Premji Foundation and also leads sustainability issues for Wipro Ltd. He writes every fortnight on issues of ecology and education. Comments are welcome at othersphere@livemint.com

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